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ABSTRACT

Junior and senior high school social studies teachers and teachers of the mildly handicapped (primarily learning disabled) in New Jersey (N=195) responded to a social issues survey. For each of 14 social issues, they were asked to indicate the frequency with which the issue was included in the instructional program, its importance, their own level of comfort with the issue, and the extent to which they felt prepared to discuss it with students. Issues rated were minority rights, substance abuse, women's rights, nuclear weapons, social welfare, child abuse, world hunger, military draft, teenage pregnancy, abortion, prayer in school, censorship, cults, and the Ku Klux Klan. Results indicated that neither special nor regular education teachers in junior or senior high school present social issues often, but that special education teachers present them even less frequently. Special educators did, however, report presenting four issues more frequently than others: substance abuse, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, and social welfare programs. Current events and responding to student questions (rather than structured lessons) were cited most frequently as the ways in which social issues were addressed. (JW)

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ARE WE PREPARING OUR LEARNING DISABLED ADOLESCENTS TO COPE WITH SOCIAL ISSUES?

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT (up to 200 words of objective summary): Poor thinking skills, social skills deficits, and a weak information base may affect adolescents with learning disabilities in their ability to make appropriate decisions regarding social issues and may make them more vulnerable to resulting negative consequences. The purpose of this research was to determine whether adolescents are being presented with knowledge about social issues which is needed as a basis for the problem-solving process. Regular and special education junior and senior high school teachers were surveyed to determine the frequency with which issues were included in the instructional program and the extent to which teachers agreed that it was important and that they were prepared and comfortable to present them. Chi-square analyses showed that special educators presented most of the issues less often than regular educators except when issues could be perceived as having an affect on a physical level, such as substance abuse. High school and male teachers present issues more frequently and teachers rated importance higher than frequency. Teacher preparation, instructional materials, in-service training and teaching methods are discussed. The results indicate that adolescents with learning disabilities may need more knowledge to make informed and responsible decisions on the many social issues they will encounter.

After reading an article in a women's magazine (Jaffe, 1983) which described a current recruitment drive being mounted by the Ku Klux Klan to attract children between 10 and 17 to join the Klan Youth Corps, this researcher began to wonder whether learning disabled adolescents would be more vulnerable to this and other negative social forces than their non-learning disabled peers. Adolescents and young adults are faced with pressing social issues and need to learn how to react to them. They, for example, are pressured to join cults and asked to sign petitions or form opinions on social issues such as women's rights, civil liberties, or abortion. The ability to make appropriate choices regarding social issues is needed to avoid the negative consequences which result from these as well as to become a participating member of society. Three factors which impact on one's ability to cope with social issues are knowledge, thinking ability and social skills.

While Alley and Deshler (1979) contend that a major goal of the educational program for learning disabled adolescents should be to help them learn to think, there are several reasons that make this a difficult task. These include thinking problems, curriculum deficiencies, and social skills deficits. Characteristics typically ascribed to the learning disabled, such as impulsivity, poor feedback, attentional problems, poor organization, or difficulty in selecting relevant information, may account for a breakdown in logical thinking. Kronick (1981) presents the consequences of illogical thought processes, distortions of judgment, and skewed responses seen in the learning disabled as resulting from their inability to store schemata and formulate images, two processes that enable an individual to judge the precise quality of a current encounter and react to it. Learning disabled students may need extra training to overcome these thinking problems in order to make informed and responsible decisions on the many social issues they will encounter.

Teachers have the responsibility to teach students to discover and process information, to formulate ideas, and to be inductive and deductive thinkers, that is, to use the problem-solving process (Dewald-Link & Wallace, 1983). A firm base of knowledge is needed as a basis for the process. While all subjects offer an appropriate context for teaching thinking skills, they can be considered an integral part of the social studies curriculum. Information selected from history, social sciences, and contemporary affairs can be used to help students make sense of their world (Fraenkel, 1980) and prepare them to cope with social issues.

Educators are reporting a dismaying inability among high school students to translate what they know into systematic ways of viewing and dealing with practical problems and are attributing this, at least in part, to the back-to-basics movement (Hanson, 1982). It is possible that instruction of learning disabled adolescents which focuses on remediating basic skills or tutoring leaves little time for presentation of thinking skills and that the materials used for remediation do not enhance this type of instruction. Teachers of the learning disabled may assume that their students cannot deal with higher order tasks until prerequisite skills have been mastered, thus limiting the content and skills they present. If this is so, the learning disabled students may be receiving even less preparation to deal with social issues than their peers.

Learning disabled adolescents may have social skills deficits that, when combined with poor thinking skills, would make them more vulnerable to making decisions that are based not on the issues but on personal appeal. In the article which started this investigation, the teens were attracted by the ritual, the regalia and the paramilitary training. A well-known tactic to attract adolescents to join cults is a promise of friendship and support. When attempting to get others

to sign a petition or support a cause, personal appeals are often made. Learning disabled adolescents and young adults, who frequently have difficulty making and keeping friends, may be swayed because they want to be liked. If they have not been taught the information and the critical thinking skills, the social appeal may be used as a basis for making important decisions.

It is important to know if learning disabled adolescents are being prepared to deal with social issues. The purpose of this research was to determine whether adolescents are being presented with knowledge about social issues, one of the factors necessary for dealing with these issues.

Method

A survey was designed and distributed to 1,000 secondary school social studies teachers and teachers of the handicapped in New Jersey. Social studies teachers were selected because of the relevance of social issues presentations to the social studies curriculum. Teachers of the handicapped were included because of the opportunities present to include social issues as part of the tutorial instruction provided to their students or as material which could be used in basic skills lessons.

The survey consisted of a Participant Data Sheet to collect information describing the respondents and a Social Issues Survey on which the respondents were asked to rate along four dimensions for each of fourteen contemporary social issues. First, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which the issue was included in the instructional program during the present and previous academic year. Second, respondents were asked to rate each of the fourteen issues using three evaluative dimensions, employing a Likert scale. These were importance which refers to the extent the teacher agreed that it was important to include the issue in the instructional program; comfort which refers to the

extent tht the teacher felt at ease in including the issue; and preparation which refers to the extent teachers felt prepared to include the issue. The dimensions of "importance," "comfort," and "preparation" were rated on a five-point basis ("5" strongly agree, "4" -agree, "3" - undecided, "2" - disagree, "1" - strongly disagree).

In addition respondents were asked to rate the frequency with which social issues were presented in eight different types of classroom techniques typically utilized. Finally, respondents were asked to rate from "most helpful" to "least helpful" eight types of assistance with which they could be provided in order to increase the amount of time they would spend teaching social issues in their classrooms.

Results

Results are presented in three sections as follows: participant data, social issues survey findings, and interrelationships between selected descriptive characteristics and the social issues survey.

Participant Data

There were 195 surveys returned. Basic data describing all the respondents are presented in Table 1. Of the 97 special education teachers who responded, 66.29 percent taught in resource rooms, 24.72 percent in self-contained classroom and 8.99 percent in more than one instructional setting. The students in these settings were classified according to the following categories using the New Jersey Regulations: Perceptually Impaired - 26.88 percent, Neurologically Impaired - 8.60 percent, other (Emotionally Disturbed; Educable Mentally Retarded) - 7.53 percent, and group consisting of combinations of the above - 56.99 percent. These categories represent the mildly handicapped with the learning disabled (Perceptually Impaired and Neurologically Impaired) yielding

the largest group.

Social Issues Survey

The Social Issues Survey generated data about fourteen social issues. The mean ratings of the respondents were calculated and are shown in Table 2. In general, none of the issues was presented "often" in the instructional programs although the teachers' mean ratings of the "importance" of doing so was for each issue higher than the mean ratings for "frequency" of presentation. The mean ratings for "comfort" indicated that teachers, in general, were undecided about or were comfortable about including the issues in their instructional program. The extent to which teachers agreed that they were prepared to include the issue in their instructional program ranged from disagreeing that they were prepared (i.e. for cults, reemergence of KKK) to indicating that they felt at least somewhat prepared (i.e. for minority rights, substance abuse).

Interrelationship of Descriptive Variables and Social Issues Survey

Chi-square analyses were employed to explore the relationship between the descriptive characteristics of respondents and ratings made by them on the Social Issues Survey. Seven descriptive characteristics, fourteen social issues, and four evaluation dimensions yielded 392 Chi-square values. Of these, 95 were found to be significant and a trend toward significance was found in 29. Table 3 summarizes the significant Chi-square interactions.

Three respondent characteristics accounted for 75 percent of the significant Chi-square values. There were:

- Type of students, regular vs. special education
- Level of classes taught, junior high vs. senior high
- Sex of teacher

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Respondent Characteristic

Characteristic		"f"	Percentage
Level:	Junior high school	80	42.55
	Senior high school	108	57.45
Type of Student:	Regular	94	50.00
	Special education	94	50.00
Years Teaching:	0 - 2	10	5.24
	3 - 10	88	46.07
	over 10	93	48.69
Sex:	Male	89	47.34
	Female	99	52.66
Geographical Area of School	Urban	9	4.74
	Suburban	161	84.73
	Rural	20	10.53

Table 2

Mean Ratings for Items on Social Issues Survey for Each Evaluative Dimension

Issue	Frequency	Importance	Comfort	Preparation
Minority Rights	3.824	4.330	4.150	3.941
Substance abuse	3.587	4.263	4.033	3.533
Women's rights	3.503	4.070	4.128	3.763
Nuclear weapons	3.363	3.953	3.974	3.296
Social welfare	3.121	3.651	3.649	3.218
Child abuse	3.109	4.053	3.865	3.443
World hunger	2.964	3.846	3.864	3.336
Military draft	2.880	3.516	3.784	3.342
Teenage pregnancy	2.627	3.832	3.549	3.269
Abortion	2.617	3.706	3.321	3.217
Prayer in school	2.593	3.000	3.516	3.353
Censorship	2.467	3.435	3.546	3.207
Re-emergence of KKK	2.394	3.124	3.359	2.914
Cults	2.139	2.780	3.011	2.495

Ratings for frequency: 5 - often, 3 - occasionally, 1 - never
Ratings for importance, comfort, preparation: 5- strongly agree, 4 - agree, 3 - undecided, 2 - disagree, 1 - strongly disagree

Given the aggregate set of seven respondent characteristics the "frequency" with which social issues were presented accounted for 32 percent of the significant Chi-square values, perceived "importance" of such presentations accounted for 20 percent, the "comfort" in presenting social issues accounted for 24 percent, and the extent of perceived "preparation" accounted for 23 percent.

When the respondent characteristics of regular vs. special educators was considered, the Chi-square cross-tabulations indicated that regular classroom teachers reported presenting some social issues more frequently and agreed it was more important to do so (significant "frequency" Chi-square values or trends on 9 social issues; significant "importance" Chi-square values or trends on 6). Special education teachers reported presenting four social issues more frequently and felt it was more important to do so. Regular classroom teachers reported more "comfort" and more "preparation" in presenting 8 of the issues. There were differences between regular and special educators in all evaluation dimension. When the respondent characteristic of junior high school vs. senior high school teachers was analyzed, high school teachers reported presenting 7 of the issues more "frequently" than junior high school teachers, who felt it was more "important" to present 6 of the issues, and felt more "comfort" and "preparation" for presenting 9 of the social issues.

Male teachers reported presenting 8 of the social issues more "frequently" and felt more "comfort" and "preparation" for 4 and 3 of the issues respectively. Female teachers reported presenting two of the issues more frequently.

Amongst the special education teachers, there were very few relationships in the evaluation dimensions between teachers who taught in resource rooms and self-contained classrooms (resource teachers had 3 significant "frequency", 3 significant "comfort", and 2 significant "preparation" Chi-square values). There were no relationships between those who taught different categories of special education students.

Table 3 – Significant Chi-square interactions for evaluation dimensions of Social Issues Survey and respondent characteristics

Social Issues	Respondent Characteristics: J.H.S. vs. H.S. f	i	c	p	Regular vs. Special Education f	i	c	p	Resource room vs. self-contained f	i	c	p	Years teaching f	i	c	p	Sex f	i	c	p	Geographic area f	i	c	p	Totals (sign/trend)
Nuclear weapons			●		●	●	●	●									●	●	●	●					9/1
Substance abuse			●	–	●	–											–								2/3
Cults		–	●	–	●		●	●									●					●		●	7/2
Re-emergence of KKK	●	–	●	●	●	●	●	●									●		–	●					9/2
Child abuse				–	●	●			●									–		●					4/2
Prayer in school	●			–	●	●	●	●					●				–					–			6/3
World hunger					●	–	●	●					●			●	–					●			6/2
Military draft	●	●	●	●	●		●	●					–			–	●		●	●		●		●	12/2
Minority rights	●	–			●	●	●	●				●					●		●						8/1
Censorship	●		●	●	●	●	●	●			–	●	●	●	–	●						●	–		12/3
Women's rights					–										●	–						–		●	2/3
Social welfare			●	●	●	–											–								3/2
Teenage pregnancy	●	–	●		●	●	●	–	●		●							●				●			9/2
Abortion	●	●	●	●					●		–						●								6/1
Subtotals (sign/trend)	7	2	9	5	12	7	9	8	3	0	1	2	3	1	1	2	6	2	3	4	1	4	2	1	Subtotals: f 32/8
	0	4	0	4	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	2	4	1	1	0	2	1	1	0	i 16/9
																									c 25/5
TOTALS	23/8				36/5				6/2				7/4				15/6				8/4				95/29 p 22/7

Evaluation Dimensions
- f = frequency
- i = importance
- c = comfort
- p = preparation

- ● significant
- – trend toward significance

Discussion

The survey indicated that neither special education nor regular education teachers in junior or senior high school present social issues often but that the special education teachers reported presenting them even less frequently. Regular high school teachers reported presenting none of the issues more frequently. These were nuclear weapons, cults, re-emergence of Ku Klux Klan, prayer in school (moment of silence), world hunger, military draft, minority rights, censorship, women's rights. There were four issues, however, which were reported to be presented more frequently by special education teachers - substance abuse, child abuse, teen-age pregnancy, and social welfare programs. It is interesting that the first three of these are issues which affect the individual on an immediate physical level. Perhaps school districts or special education teachers feel that mildly handicapped students cannot make decisions regarding their own bodies or are helpless and are therefore more vulnerable to the negative consequences of these issues. Therefore, to protect their students, teachers report including these issues more in the instructional program.

This same concern, as reflected by teachers' reports of the frequency of presentation and importance they attach to presentation of social issues, does not appear to extend to issues that do not affect youngsters immediately on a physical level such as cults, threat of nuclear weapons, re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, prayer in school, world hunger, military draft, minority rights, censorship, or women's rights, issues which regular educators reported presenting more of than special educators. Thus, regular education students are presented with a greater array of social issues which, in turn, may provide them with the knowledge base needed to understand and deal with these issues. The study was completed just before the issue of world hunger reached the headlines so that the media focus on the issue was not a factor. It was done at the time that the

State of New Jersey, where it was conducted, had instituted a "moment of silence" in schools which was being challenged in the courts because of contentions that it was prayer in the school. The fact that this issue was not presented often indicates that current issues may not be utilized for their instructional value or that there is fear or pressure about presenting controversial issues in the classroom. In fact, several teachers reported that the school administration requested them not to complete the survey because it dealt with controversial issues.

The fact that some issues were presented more frequently by teachers with more than 10 years of experience and that these teachers also felt somewhat more prepared to do so may indicate that teacher preparation programs in both special and regular education do not address the ultimate goal of education, the preparation of students to cope with life issues, adequately. In regular education this may be so even in the social studies in spite of the fact that this goal is purported to be the aim of the social studies curriculum (Fraenkel, 1980). In many special education curriculum guides and teacher preparation textbooks there is emphasis on basic skills or real-life skills such as banking or job applications for learning disabled adolescents rather than on presentation of a knowledge base. Male teachers reported presenting eight issues more frequently and reported feeling somewhat more comfortable and prepared which may indicate that male and female teachers perceive their role in informing students about social issues in different ways. Female teachers may be more reluctant to deal with real-life issues, may have less confidence in the ability of the students, or may want to shield students from real-life issues.

The ratings on the frequency with which social issues were brought up in different types of classroom presentations indicated that current events and responding to student questions were the most frequent ways which social issues

were presented. Thus, structured lessons or parallels to historical teachings by which information about these issues can be presented are not utilized for this important type of instruction. Special education students who often have difficulty asking appropriate questions may be deprived of the opportunity to gain information by this method. The current events materials frequently used in special education instruction are "easy reader" magazines or newspapers which may not provide the depth of information needed for decision-making purposes. The types of presentations utilized least in social issues study were student reports and student readers which indicates that, even in special education classes where some readers used to practice basic skills may include readings about some of the social issues, teachers are not taking advantage of these opportunities to include social issues in their instructional program. The infrequent use of student readers may be because teachers do not perceive these as adequate in how they present information. This was borne out of the fact that appropriate reading materials for students was rated as the most helpful in a list of eight types of assistance that could be provided to help teachers if they wanted to increase the time spent on social issues in their instructional program. The second most useful was reading materials for teachers which is in line with the rating teachers gave to how well prepared they felt they were to present social issues which ranged from feeling unprepared to feeling somewhat prepared. However, teachers rated in-service workshops and lesson plans for teaching critical reading skills as the least helpful in terms of what would be needed to assist them if they wanted to increase presentation of social issues; it appears that teachers may indeed feel somewhat comfortable about presenting these issues, as they rated themselves, if they were provided with appropriate reading materials for themselves and their students. Perhaps providing materials would be enough to allow the teachers

to close the gap between their higher rating of the importance of presenting social issues and their lower rating of the frequency of presenting the issues.

The implications of the research are important. Although more research is needed on the level of student knowledge about social issues and about the interrelationship of knowledge, critical thinking, and social skills in dealing with these issues, it is clear that ways must be found to provide adolescents, especially the learning disabled, with the information needed in order to learn how to cope with complex and challenging contemporary social issues.

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